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ABSTRACT

Rural communities can successfully integrate service learning into academic subject areas. In service learning, students develop a deeper understanding of academic subjects while engaging in meaningful service to their school or greater community. Barriers to implementing service learning in rural areas include lack of time, transportation, student supervision, and teacher experience. Schools can begin by identifying and expanding voluntary community-service activities already being done by school-age children and youth. Instructional time is not wasted when projects involve skills such as typing or proofreading a mailing list for a service agency, monitoring the local water supply, or interviewing community residents. Innovative ways of finding transportation for students to engage in service activities are suggested. Experienced students and adult volunteers can serve as trainers and supervisors for new students entering a project. Teachers can be trained through courses in service learning or by mentors who supervise adult volunteers. Service learning in the school could involve peer tutoring, beautification projects, or light maintenance. All these activities integrate help to the community with academic skill building. (KS)

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ED 367 511

REMOVING BARRIERS

SERVICE LEARNING IN RURAL AREAS

by Cynthia Parsons

For the Council of Chief State School Officers

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Introduction

Service learning is a method of learning and teaching. Through a structured process of preparation, service, observation, and analysis, students develop a deeper understanding of academic subjects while engaging in meaningful service to their school or greater community.

For the past five years the Council has been actively promoting service learning as a means of improving both student learning and teacher practice. The focus of the Council's effort has been to assist states in integrating service-learning into education policy, teacher preparation programs and school practice.

This publication, developed for the Council of Chief State School Officers by Cynthia Parsons, coordinator of SerVermont, deals with removing some of the barriers to implementing service learning initiatives in rural communities. Ms. Parsons describes several examples of how rural communities can and have have successfully integrated service-learning into academic subject areas.

REMOVING BARRIERS
Service Learning in Rural Areas

What Barriers?

* Time: The school day is full to overflowing. Children already have a difficult time fitting in homework between duties at home, obligations at work, after school activities and normal social engagements. *[That's why this monograph concentrates on suggestions for service learning that don't require extra time.]*

* Distance: There's no subway or bus system to get students from home to school to volunteer jobs to work assignments to social activities and back home again. *[That's why this monograph is chock full of suggestions for ways to get around the transportation problem.]*

* Supervision: Rural school teachers and administrators operate on tight schedules. Their classes are large and heterogeneous, and they don't have time in their schedules to take on additional assignments. *[That's why this monograph suggests how others can provide excellent supervision.]*

* Inexperience. By and large, we haven't used community-based, human service agencies as "classrooms," or made much effort to integrate service activities with the school curriculum. *[That's why this monograph suggests training and professional development in service learning.]*

* The three R's. We all know what happens. We think of a good way to interest children in learning that doesn't involve sitting at a desk reading and writing, and we're admonished to remember our job is to teach "the basics" and not to provide "frills." *[That's why this monograph explains how service learning provides solid practice in the three R's.]*

What's rural?

It's where a "mall" is less than six stores. It's where the buildings on main street back into woods or pastures. It's where there aren't trolleys, subways, or buses to carry passengers from one part of town to another.

It's where silos and grain elevators are the tallest structures around. It's where folks park their cars outside on the ground and where there are no parking garages going underground or up in the air.

It's where there are towns with fewer than three thousand people close to neighboring towns with even fewer people, such as Bruce, Brewer, and Redlick in Mississippi; Torpedo, Arcadia, and New Paris in Pennsylvania; Aloha, Lind, and Blue Creek in Washington; Otwell, Zenis, and Wheatfield in Indiana; Aroya, Arriba, and Wray in Colorado.

It's where most schools aren't within walking distance of where children live; it's where those who have home chores to do can't stay after school for varsity athletics and club activities.

It's where people help each other without being asked: like taking a casserole when there's an emergency, pushing a stuck car, fighting a fire, moving a dead limb off the road, or sharing candles when the power goes off.

It's where it really makes a difference what the weather is like, what the roads are like, whether the river is rising.

Where to start?

Start with all the voluntary community service activities already being done by

school-age children and youth in your community. You may be surprised to discover how many school students already sing in choirs, participate in youth clubs, do peer-training, are active in church work, volunteer with family members in human service agencies, do chores for elderly neighbors, serve as a pen or phone pal, raise funds for local and national causes, and look for ways to help in local emergencies.

* Science is a required school subject. Locate all students throughout the school system already involved in voluntary recycling, pollution control, and health-related (biology) activities. Use them, and descriptions of what they are learning, to help you teach classes in science and health.

* Let the older students help younger pupils form an accurate picture of available environmental and health services in your rural area. Break free of science instruction based solely on text or workbook material. Study, as well, the overall health and environment needs of your own community, helping your students understand not only what is readily available, but also how to access appropriate health and environmental agencies.

* Encourage student volunteers to recruit other students -- even whole classrooms -- to help out in community-improvement service activities. Perhaps a student volunteer knows that a local hospital or nursing home needs assistance with a newsletter; or that an organization working to beautify the area, clean up a river or lake, or make the air safer to breathe needs newsletter help. Hence, an English composition class might offer to do necessary proofreading; a health or science class might offer to do a safety-tips advice column; a typing class might offer to prepare the mailing labels; a computer class might offer to design and print the newsletter while practicing desktop publishing skills. Primary grade pupils could do the stuffing and sealing of the envelopes, counting them out in piles for arithmetic practice.

* A student volunteer who works with the visiting nurse service could encourage the nurses to keep the school principal abreast of the needs of those living alone or of someone

temporarily restricted in movement.

* Then teachers could have those older students needing to practice language arts skills prepare oral tapes by reading aloud the text of important documents, or take dictation over the telephone and prepare a business letter, or improve oral speaking skills by being a phone pal for a lonely adult. About those documents: Information about Social Security or Medicare or insurance or zoning laws or absentee voting might not be available to one temporarily without sight or restricted in movement. Older students, as part of a language arts course, could read the documents, determine what's needed for a specific patient, and provide an oral or visual tape recording explaining the material, and what the next steps might need to be.

* All kindergarten and primary school pupils love to draw -- and need to do so as part of their academic program. This artwork might well be done on tray liners for the meals-on-wheels program, local hospital, or nursing home. Even those wonderful illustrated stories young learners do on wide-lined paper practicing language arts skills would make entertaining tray liners for those having restricted meals. An adult volunteer could drop by a school one or two days a week to pick up the stories and artwork and take them to a receptive facility.

* Similarly, an adult volunteer could pick up tape-recorded stories and documents, getting them to those who need them. While there are professional tape recordings available for those with limited sight, there are no recordings of local weekly or daily newspapers. What a grand lesson in reading and oral expression for a group of elementary-level students, working under the direction of an older student or teacher's aide, to prepare a cassette of interesting local news on a regular basis for those in the community who are legally blind!

Which students are already volunteering?

To find out which students are volunteering in the community, homeroom teachers

and guidance counselors might arrange for a survey of the entire student body at the start of each marking period. Once collected, the information could be placed under headings such as HEALTH, PEER HELPING, THE ENVIRONMENT, SOCIAL SERVICE. Names of those volunteering in each area could be listed and posted prominently throughout the school. This could serve as a double stimulus -- on the one hand, an incentive for other students to get involved; on the other, for academic teachers to seek ways to use the involved students to help them integrate their coursework with the performance of needed service, either by individual pupils or by student groups. Who might carry out such a survey?

* A Girl or Boy Scout working on a communications badge.

* A 4-H student leader.

* A social studies class as homework for a special project on the meaning of participatory democracy.

* A group of general math students doing a project under the tutelage of an advanced placement 12th grade math student. As the school year progresses, these math students could do some statistical analysis of growth (or shrinkage) of volunteers and design charts and graphs based on the compiled data.

What about time?

* If, for example, students in a beginning typing class type and proofread a mailing list for a United Way agency, they aren't taking time away from schoolwork. They need to learn to type and correctly proofread accurate mailing lists.

* Typing students who offer to write letters for those who don't have access to a typewriter

need, of course, to learn how to set up a letter and make it letter perfect.

* If students learning a foreign language begin pen or phone pal relationships with elderly (perhaps institutionalized) community members fluent in the language under study, they will not only have brought special cheer into the life of a community member, but have an opportunity to practice the language with an expert. As part of learning how to translate, students can write to their pen pals and give the letters to the teacher for grading and correction -- a much more interesting and relevant activity than translating passages from the textbook.

* History students who work as volunteers with local historical association members learn how history is made and recorded. This helps them understand the period of history they are studying and gives them an opportunity to think as a historian.

* Chemistry and general science students who monitor local water supplies not only help improve water quality for the whole community, but have an opportunity to learn what the scientific method is and how to apply it.

* The Foxfire method of using community resources to learn the first two of the 3 R's (reading and writing), as well as to provide the community with a written record of itself, has been described and celebrated from coast to coast. It needs no further explanation here. But if your school children are not regularly interviewing community residents, regularly writing reports of what they learn, regularly compiling the material, printing it, and distributing it throughout the community, then you have missed a golden service-learning opportunity.

<u>What about transportation?</u>

You may have noticed that the suggestions made so far about combining voluntary service with schoolwork have not involved extra transportation on anyone's part, and most

importantly, have not involved the school in moving students about at all. But, let's say you really would like to have a few students go regularly to serve in a local human service agency that is not within walking distance. And you want them to go during the school day, perhaps during a free period, and need for them to come and go on a specific schedule. The expensive way, of course, is to have a school bus on standby, and pay a driver to run this special route. We all know how much it adds to the budget to run that "late" bus each afternoon! Here are three suggestions for getting rural students safely and under adequate insurance protection, from school to service site and back again.

(1) Use the back seat of the driver education car. Since the car is insured and there has to be an official adult in the car anyway, let the practicing student driver take students forth and back.

(2) Use a Red Cross vehicle driven by an authorized R.S.V.P. (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) volunteer. While the local Red Cross has access to vehicles, often rural chapters do not have a sufficient supply of Red Cross drivers free during the school day to make such a special trip. But working with the R.S.V.P. office, generally drivers can be found, and all in the vehicle are covered by the Red Cross insurance.

(3) Ask the agency that needs and wants the student volunteers either to provide their own vehicle or to use the local taxi service. Ask them to do the pick up as a community service and provide them with public commendation for so doing. In this case the students are covered by the agency's insurance policy, as well, perhaps, as the school's policy.

What about supervision?

Teachers and school administrators know that children learn from parents, relatives, church officials, youth leaders, managers, bosses, and from each other lessons that directly support necessary school subjects. Sometimes the connection between academic study and practical application -- as between research and practice -- requires the professional

teacher's touch. It is the professional educator who knows how to weave laboratory experimentation with scientific theory, who knows how to integrate job skills and basic skills, who knows how to improve a student's understanding of theory by providing just the right kinds of practical experience. Yet, such pedagogy doesn't mean that the classroom teacher has to be the primary supervisor in both the academic setting and in the workplace. Some examples:

* A county hospital welcomes school-age volunteers as "gofers." Once a student volunteer has served some 10 hours carrying X-ray pictures from one department to another, he or she is allowed to train the next neophyte volunteer. The same is true of those student volunteers who serve as escorts from the visitor's lounge to the requested designation. The initial instruction in how to carry out hospital work assignments are provided by experienced adults, but once a student has performed his or her duties satisfactorily over a suitable period of time, the instruction is given by students to students.

* School-age volunteer firefighters in one rural area are given very specific jobs, essential but not life-threatening. Students who serve satisfactorily for more than two years are designated as firefighter instructors and handle both the training and the supervision of all incoming school-age volunteers.

* An annual Christmas gift-giving program, coordinated with local churches and serving needy rural children, is supervised and coordinated by a crew of student leaders. Students who have been workers in the program for a minimum of three years and are voted into the supervisory positions by their fellow workers.

* Very often adult supervisors of children in nonprofit organizations are themselves volunteers. It's the wise school staff who meets with these supervisors to encourage their emphasis of progress in academic understanding as well as workplace skills.

<u>What about training for teachers?</u>

There are a few organizations around the United States offering training in service learning to both teachers and managers of volunteers in nonprofits. And there's every indication that there will be more, because part of the National and Community Service Act funds are earmarked for colleges and universities to provide such courses.

But follow the example of Plato and Aristotle and seek your own mentors. Learn from supervisors of adult volunteers about ways to make the service activity challenging and satisfying; learn from other teachers how to enliven subject matter with assignments in voluntary community service; listen to students, learning from them why it is they learn in one setting and not in another.

What about serving the school community?

Many agree that the greatest needs and the greatest service successes -- delightfully -- come from one easily adaptable service-learning activity: peer tutoring. What comes easily to one pupil may come slowly to another. Watch children at batting practice during the start of the baseball season or children attempting free throws on a basketball court. "Do it this way; here I'll show you." That's peer tutoring. And it works. To the delight of interested school authorities, peer tutoring works most effectively with basic literacy skills. And test after test has shown that learning is enhanced for both the tutor and the one being tutored. Asking strong-performing pupils on school time to tutor a floundering pupil, then, doesn't delay learning for the tutor. And tests have further revealed that pupils actually poor in a specific skill gain knowledge by tutoring. For example:

* If a fifth grade teacher lets his poorest speller tutor the third grade teacher's poorest speller, this turns out not to be a pedagogical disaster, but service learning at its finest. The fifth grader gains not only self-esteem, but also gains knowledge. And the third grader is considerably buoyed by the fact that soon he'll be able to tutor someone even worse off than himself!

* Of course, there are other ways children can serve the school: landscaping, artworks, light maintenance, dramatics, clubs, intramural and interschool athletics, social dancing, library care and expansion, beautification, and clerking.

* The general science class could, annually, as a regular part of the curriculum, care for and improve the school grounds.

* Certain portions of the school building as well as the school grounds could be reserved for works of art, juried students taking art classes, and including the display of art from community residents.

* Each grade in a school could be assigned light maintenance chores within the building and on the school grounds. Kindergarten pupils, for example, might be in charge of picking up paper in the cafeteria. First graders could dump all wastebaskets under the monitoring eye of a fifth, sixth, or seventh grader. Second graders might dust the books on the bottom three shelves of the library stacks. Third graders could be called on to run errands for the front office. Fourth graders could be put in charge of the care and repair of sports and recreation equipment. Fifth graders could maintain audiovisual equipment, being the operators when needed.

* Sixth graders could take turns serving as clerks for the school office, school nurse, school librarian, school principal. Seventh graders might police the school grounds and keep them litter-free. Eighth graders could handle incoming telephone calls; be in charge of school supplies; handle repairs of simple equipment.

* Oral and written reports on these activities -- at every grade level -- could be part of language arts instruction.

* In a good many rural areas, the high school and the elementary school are close by,

sometimes even in the same building. All high school students who wished to could be allowed to have lunch with an elementary pupil, sharing an interest such as stamp collecting, chess, computer games, knitting, drawing, or reading.

* Alternatively, elementary pupils practicing a play, reciting a poem, or learning a song could visit a high school English class and give them a dress rehearsal.

* Now, let's go a step further, and invite community members to come to school at lunchtime, and, paired off, play games, talk, read, sing, dance, and have fun together. Maybe just once a week, those adults willing to drive elderly residents could provide the needed transportation.

* I know a rural school located a short walking distance from a nursing home; students regularly "bag lunch" with residents and are allowed to spend free periods at the home. The biology students regularly maintain the home's aquarium, which the industrial arts class built and the biology class originally designed and stocked.

* I know another rural school -- using community-supplied transportation -- that arranges for interested students to "borrow" pets from the local humane society and take them on "visits" to a local nursing home. What they learn during their visits is included in a health class study about mental health.

<u>When is service not service learning?</u>

I knew a school principal who regularly sent a bus to a senior citizen housing complex and provided lunch for any of them who wanted to come to the school. I'm sorry to say that not once did the principal ever include any of the school students in this project. Asked why the senior citizens came <u>after</u> the students had eaten, he said: "Our kids have a full schedule; no time for this." While he called what he did "community service," it was about as far as one can get from service learning. He missed a golden opportunity to follow the

Foxfire example. What about having the visiting seniors interviewed by students and having their biographies written for English class? What about history students interviewing the elders about what they thought of the period currently under study by the class and writing up what they learned, comparing it with what their texts and other resource material claimed. What about the art students providing each visiting senior with something for their wall or table top? What about the music students giving a short recital? In that particular school, among the invited seniors who would have enjoyed coming to school to mingle with students were native speakers of Finnish, French, and German. What a missed opportunity for students studying another language to join the lunch guests and learn about linguistic similarities and differences.

What about homework?

As school students mature, it's possible to give them long-term homework assignments. Teachers who do this can find wonderful ways to include service-learning experiences that not only provide needed skill practice, but also cause students to think deeply about the need for human services throughout the community. The following are examples of homework service activities that have been tried in rural areas north, south, east, and west.

* A science teacher might ask a group of four or five students to spend some time with the volunteer fire department crew, researching what chemicals are used, how they are contained, what safety measures are necessary, and how each functions during a fire. Their grade could be based on their written and/or oral report. But, as a community service, the students could prepare a report on chemical use and provide it to the local media -- possibly even a tape for a local cable television company to air on public-access time.

* A math teacher might ask the entire class to interview construction workers about the mathematics involved in their work. In this case, each student would be asked to write a paper based on at least two interviews and then make up a set of math examples for the rest

of the class to work out. Again, once the construction-math was learned, the students could prepare an article for the local media, including the local cable television company.

* Specific single-concept lessons in math, science, history, geography, grammar, etc. could be worked out by groups of students as their homework assignments and videotaped for the homework helptime on the local cable television channel.

* English composition students could offer to compile the newsletters for local agencies. Perhaps once each marking period, a group of up to ten students could work with a single agency -- the humane society, for example -- and complete their newsletter. This activity could count for two weeks of homework. Maybe they could enlist the help of members of a typing class, and together they would hand in the completed newsletter for their homework grade. The teachers involved could provide some classroom time for the students to do final compiling; or the teachers could assume that the agency personnel would provide the necessary leadership.

What if you don't believe in service learning?

None of the above suggestions makes any sense unless one believes that children learn what school authorities and assessors deem essential while doing voluntary community service. Those who follow a textbook or workbook's syllabus and use lesson plans that only simulate interaction with others are often convinced that students are distracted -- not enlightened -- by service learning activities. Such teachers only provide community service as an extracurricular offering.

That's not all bad. Children do learn what it means to be caring by caring; they learn how a community's health is based on community caring by being involved; they learn to make choices about the kind of small "d" democrat they want to be by studying the choices caring adults have made.

But the phrase "service learning" doesn't mean extracurricular or cocurricular; it implies a two-way learning opportunity: That serving will support learning and that learning is enhanced through service.

To return to the typing class, the one where the students are working on a mailing list for the local humane society's annual fund drive. An alert teacher will invite the director of the humane society to come visit the class, explain the need for the fund drive, tell how the mailing list has been assembled, speak compellingly about the need for accuracy, and answer questions about why that community needs a humane society. Accuracy in typing names and zip codes and in eliminating duplications will be important to the students, who know that the mailing is going to family, friends, and neighbors and isn't just an exercise in the typing manual.

Or, perhaps the envelopes could be hand-addressed by younger students needing penmanship practice. Again, having the director of the humane society explain to the students the need for the annual drive and why the addresses on the envelopes need to be accurate and readable will provide the students with more than penmanship drill; it will strengthen their understanding of the services needed in their community, give them an impetus to provide a home and love for pets, and make them appreciative of the choices members of a community make for sharing and caring.

We who live in rural areas of the United States know that community resources are not nearly as accessible as they are in urban centers. We educators know that schools in rural areas have many roles to play for the students, and that what we lack in financial resources we need to make up for with imagination and creative resources. One such resource is the integration of help to the community with academic skill building; that is, service learning.